

Offred at the Roman Catholic Hostel

Alestine André
University of Victoria

NOTE: This short essay is meant to accompany Christine St. Peter's article which begins on page 93.

MY INITIAL REACTION AFTER READING Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* was, "What a chilling novel." It sounded so familiar. As I read, I was intrigued especially by the pauses in the thought process, weaving in and out of Offred's mind, and the power this process held for her to maintain sanity in a tyrannical society.

The established hierarchical and class structures within the mono-theocratic system in the Republic of Gilead is alarmingly similar to my own experience between 1959 and 1970 within the confines of a Roman Catholic administered hostel for the "education" of Native children. The control of the Commander over the Wife who, in turn, had control over the Handmaid, who in turn was above the Marthas, sounded too similar to the priest/administrator, head of the hostel, who had authority over the nuns, brothers, supervisors, kitchen and sewing-room staff. The nuns/supervisors, in turn, had authority and control over the children. The control, the loss of voice and personhood, is striking in both the novel and in my young life.

Tragically, the tyrannical hierarchy of the white "caretakers" was mirrored in the children's group. At the bottom of the heap, within the "Junior" Girls' dormitory section, existed an authoritative system where social and racial classes were drawn between Metis "bully kids," whose families were government wage-earners, versus the Indian and Inuit "victim kids," whose families were trappers who lived on the land. Everyone, including the

neutral kids, were burdened with a code of silence when cruel actions were imposed on subordinate girls by the superordinate girls. All the girls knew that, if one told, that meant punishment for everyone. Like the Aunts, the nuns had their favourites, which created further conflict and mistrust.

Like the experience of Offred in Gilead, my confinement in the Catholic hostel created intense internalized feelings — private thoughts and conversations, unending stories and strategies, anxieties and anticipations, wishes, fantasies and dreams. You could never leave, except in you head, but it was a good form of escapism — even only during a few brief moments. That feeling of powerlessness made the forbidden tempting for some, like Atwood's Moira, urging them to turn renegade, taking chances to run away ...only to be caught, returned and punished.

I intend to get out of here. It can't last forever. Others have thought such things, in bad times before this, and they were always right, they did get out one way or another, and it didn't last forever. Although for them it may have lasted all the forever they had. (Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, 126)

Atwood's Aunts are like the cool, unfeeling, suspicious, accusing, arms-always-crossed, stiff-statured nuns. We lived the regimented lifestyle of the Handmaids: all activities done in pairs, or single file, hands over blankets, knees down, in silence; or chanted altogether, the military-like marches to and

from the cafeteria, marched off again to Sunday church — at the right pace, the right space, and solemn single file into the chapel for the agonizing 6:00 a.m. mass during the month of May.

The bell is tolling; we can hear it from a long way off. It's morning, and today we've had no breakfast. When we reach the main gate we file through it, two by two ... We take our places in the standard order: Wives and daughters on the folding wooden chairs placed towards the back, Econowives and Marthas around the edges and on the library steps, and Handmaids at the front, where everyone can keep an eye on us. We don't sit on chairs, but kneel, but this time we have cushions, small red velvet ones with nothing written on them, not even *Faith*. (256, 257)

As I read, I felt Offred's feelings, fears, hopes, and dreams — her powerlessness; the uniforms used to identify your status, Handmaid or the "Junior" or "Senior" girls section. We were divided by sex and age and punished if caught talking with the boys, even if he was your brother. The ear pulling and twisting for being defiant; the endless preaching about bad grades and how fortunate we were to be well taken care of; the cool, aloof stares of the nuns... You are made to feel like nothing and the loss of yourself as a whole being; the feeling of powerlessness and the silencing is extremely painful. Your hands were tied and you were helpless. There did not seem to be an end to it except in your mind, where you had ultimate control to escape.